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**Challenges and visions in school music education: Focusing on Chinese and Lithuanian realities**

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**Abstract**

This article focuses on music education in Chinese and Lithuanian schools, especially on the latest reforms of the national music curriculum for basic and general education. Due to the original reasons and historical development in the east and west, the philosophies of educations are different, resulting in differences in concepts of education, goals of education, methods of education, roles of teachers and students. The process of collecting information for music education in Lithuania and China will be explained in order to gain insight into specific issues related to each country. The resulting similarities and differences between Chinese and Lithuanian school music education are reported, and suggestions for basic and teacher education improvement are discussed. Most importantly, the findings of this study have highlighted that the notions of school music education in Lithuania and China are insignificantly different.

**Keywords:** Chinese general music education, music curriculum, music activities, Lithuanian general music education.

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## 1. Introduction

Education is a vital key to success in the modern world (Stromquist & Monkman, 2014). When a nation is preparing its next generation to face a rapidly changing world and wishing to enhance its ability to compete economically and politically, education reform becomes an international concern. Music can open up wider channels for personality development, identity building and human qualities. Music education has a long history of defending its place in the school curriculum, with practitioners and researchers alike arguing for the creative, social and cognitive benefits of music in young people's lives (Crawford, 2017; Pits, 2017). However, no educational reform program can succeed without the support and active participation of teachers (Lee & Song, 2016).

Why is music important, how is it best taught and learned and what does quality entail in music education? These are examples of essential questions examined in music education philosophy (Elliott & Silverman, 2015). What can be considered to be relevant content and practice in music education? Should music teacher education have an experience-based focus or a more academic, subject-oriented focus? These are some central and enduring questions in the current international music (teacher) education debate (Campbell & Banks, 2018; Montemayor, Coppola & Mena, 2018; Watts, 2018).

A few studies up to now have centred on cross-cultural comparisons in the field of general music education (Cabedo-Mas, Nethsinghe & Forrest, 2017; Cox & Stevens, 2016; Hardcastle, Pitts & Arostegui, 2017; Kertz-Welzel, 2013; Rodriguez-Quiles y Gaarcia & Dogani, 2011; Sepp, Ruokonen & Ruismaki, 2014; Sinclair, 2014), they included the comparison of Spanish and English, Estonian and Finnish and other EU countries, Australian and Spanish, German and American, Chinese and American music education. Many studies have noted that scholars and music teachers in many countries are facing similar problems related to teacher training, comprehensive school music education, music curricula, performance-based or general music education and classroom management. A big number of authors emphasise the significance of socio-cultural context implementing music education. The exchange between various traditions of music education can help in terms of developing more effective methods in comparative music education and in music education programmes for teachers because today's music classrooms are in a sense always multicultural beyond national boundaries (Lasauskiene & Yang, 2017).

Many countries have strong, well-funded music programmes that are supported by a national belief in the value of music (and arts) education. Music education thrives in countries, such as Sweden, Finland, Norway and Denmark, where it often extends beyond the classroom to include extra-curricular musical instruction that is publicly subsidised. In Canada, England and the United States, music education is less consistent; varying from district to district and, indeed, from school to school. Music programmes, particularly in public schools, are often underfunded or abandoned altogether under budgetary pressure. In many countries, music is also seen as an important vehicle for preserving or establishing a national identity and learners are often exposed to traditional folk culture music. This is particularly prevalent in eastern European and Baltic countries. The issue of teacher quality concerns not only the western world, but all other nations as well, including China and Lithuania. What do we know about China's and Lithuania's music education system? Not very much.

### 1.1. Problem statement

The research questions are the following: what are the main characteristic features of comprehensive school music education in China and Lithuania? What kind of differences and similarities can be found between Chinese and Lithuanian general music education?

The reason for selecting China and Lithuania was their national strategic orientation into music education (educating children in music), particularly to basic school music education.

## **1.2. Purpose of the study**

The aim of the study was to study and compare teaching and learning music at general schools in the two countries in order to find out what can we learn from each other.

## **2. Methodology**

The research design is based on comparative analysis (Ijdens, 2015). Comparative music education is concerned with the description and comparison of different systems of music education at national and regional level (Cabedo-Mas, 2017; Cox & Stevens, 2016; Hardcastle et al. 2017; Kertz-Welzel, 2013; Rodriguez-Quiles y Gaarcia & Dogani, 2011; Sepp et al., 2014; Sinclair, 2014). The method of data collection involved collecting the information on music education in schools in Lithuania and China in order to gain insight into specific issues related to each country. For the research data analysis, various official and national educational documents (music curriculum of comprehensive schools, syllabus for the subject of music) and scientific sources were interpreted. The collected data were analysed using comparative content analysis.

## **3. General music education in China and Lithuania: Comparative national contexts**

The People's Republic of China (hereafter 'China') is the world's most populous country, with a population of over 1.3 billion, covering approximately 9.6 million square kilometres (OECD, 2016). China has the largest education system in the world with almost 260 million students and over 15 million teachers in about 514,000 schools, excluding graduate education institutions. China's education system is not only immense but also diverse. Chinese civilisation dates back 5,000 years and Chinese culture and values have been remarkably consistent over the centuries.

Lithuania, an Eastern European country, is the largest and most populous of the three Baltic states. Lithuania has a population of 2,876 thousand people (OECD, 2017). Lithuania covers an area of 65,300 km<sup>2</sup>. The first documented school in Lithuania was established in 1387. In the beginning of the school year of 2016–2017, 1,151 general education schools provided education to 331 thousand school learners, which was a 4.3 thousand (1.3%) decrease compared with the school year of 2015–2016. The changes in the numbers of school age population are predetermined by birth rate, international migration and other factors. Lithuanian education system has multiple structural problems. Insufficient funding and quality issues are the most prevalent.

Today, China has the world largest school music education system. Formal school music education, however, has a history of only about 100 years, with school music education still lacking standardisation and real nation-wide adoption on all levels. The Lithuanian educational system compared to that of other countries is young—*General Concept of Education* in Lithuanian was adopted in 1992 (Lietuvos svietimo koncepcija, 1992). After the restoration of Independence (1990), there appeared an opportunity to create a national system of education, to include music lessons, to formulate goals to the new system and its structural elements, which respond to the most progressive trends of the world and Europe, in particular, as well as to the uniqueness of Lithuania.

In general, China and Lithuania share several similar ideas and foundations in policy-making for the compulsory comprehensive education. As can be seen in Table 1, pupils enter basic school at the age of seven (or six) and attend classes 5 days a week. Before that, children often attend pre-school or kindergarten. Pre-school education is not compulsory in both countries. The main difference lies in the structures' (organisation) of school: in China each child must have 9 years of compulsory education from primary school (6 years) to junior secondary education (3 years). After finishing compulsory education, students can choose whether to continue with senior secondary education (3 years) (OECD, 2016). In Lithuania, education is compulsory for pupils until they reach 16 years of age (OECD, 2017). The duration of the primary education programme is 4 years. After the completion of their primary

education, pupils begin the 6-year lower secondary education programme. Upper secondary education is not compulsory and usually lasts 2 years.

**Table 1. School structures in China and Lithuania (duration in years)**

School structures	China	Lithuania
Pre-school and kindergarten	1–3 years (optional)	1–5 years (optional)
Pre-primary and primary school	6 years (compulsory) Grades 1–6	4 years (compulsory) Grades 1–4
Junior secondary school (China) Lower secondary school (Lithuania)	3 years (compulsory) Grades 7–9	6 years (compulsory) Grades 5–10
Senior secondary education (China) Upper secondary school (Lithuania)	3 years (optional) Grades 10–12	2 years (optional) Grades 11–12

Both countries have National Curricula with subject syllabi as a basis for organisation work in comprehensive schools. Since the early 2000s numerous policies have been developed by Chinese government bodies and educational institutions at various levels (Xiong & Zheng, 2012). In order to bring music education to the right track, the Ministry of Education has successively issued and implemented a series of regulatory documents on music education curriculum standards, music teaching syllabus and music teaching plans (Ho, 2014). China's basic education went through ups and downs, alongside with the political, social and economic changes (Wang, 2012). Some argue that this is because of the fact that China's education system has long been dominated by Confucian teachings. The curriculum reform in China is by its nature a step towards educational modernisation that empowers students with more autonomy of their own learning. It also entails more autonomy for teachers and schools in curriculum development (Kayange & Msiska, 2016). Despite China's emergence as one of the world's most influential economies, relatively little is known in other countries about China's music education system or about how its students learn.

During the reform of compulsory education in Lithuania, the content of curriculum was regulated by several general programmes. Currently, the main documents, regulating the state level curriculum in comprehensive schools are *The General Curriculum of Pre-primary Education* (Priesmokyklinio ugdymo bendroji programa, 2014) and *The Description of Primary, Basic and Secondary Education Curriculum* (Del pradinio, pagrindinio ir vidurinio..., 2015). All of this was part of educational reforms to establish a western Lithuanian educational system that have not stopped ever since. However, the decline in the numbers of students and school learners in the recent years have introduced significant changes in the network of Lithuanian schools of higher and general education. Nowadays, the Lithuanian musical education system is a result of the continuity of national musical mentality, the country's musical culture traditions that have been nourished for many decades (Vitkauskas, Abramauskiene, Barisas, Kirliauskiene & Tarnauskaite-Palubinskiene, 2012). At that time, music teaching and its ideas in Lithuania were influenced by Western European and Russian music pedagogy. However, it is particularly important that the content of music teaching actually remained national in its character.

### **3.1. Music as a compulsory subject in Chinese and Lithuanian comprehensive schools**

According to National Curricula, both China and Lithuania have mandatory music lessons in compulsory comprehensive schools. In China, the music curriculum recommends two lessons each week of 'music games' for first and second grade students, two lessons per week for third through fifth grade students, and one weekly music lesson for sixth grade students and up (Sinclair, 2014).

Starting from grade 10, music is an optional subject. In Lithuania, the minimum number of music lessons per week in grades 1–4 is two lessons and from grades 5–10 is one lesson. During grades 11–12, music is, in most schools, an optional subject (the exception is schools with specialised educational field programmes). As can be seen in Table 1, both countries share the same amount of music lessons (Table 2). For example, in Finland, the total number of mandatory music lessons is seven (Sepp et al., 2014).

**Table 2. Number of music lessons in compulsory comprehensive schools**

Grades	China	Lithuania
1–4	8	8
5–10	6	6
11–12	-	-
The total number of mandatory music lessons (minimum number for all students)	14	14

Music is highly valued by Chinese and Lithuanian society in general today, therefore, it follows that educating children in music is high priority. Music education in China today integrates music, arts, dance and drama and links these arts with emotions, culture, science and life as a whole. Chinese music textbooks, titled Yin-yue, are reviewed and approved by the Ministry of Education, whose teaching materials for primary and secondary schools are used widely in Shanghai and other major cities in China. The curriculum content is divided into one stage for the first through fifth grades and another for sixth through ninth grades. Both stages focus on developing musical sensitivity and a love for music; cultivating aesthetic judgment; teaching the ‘Five Loves’ (love the motherland, love the people, love labour, love science and love socialism) and cultivating students’ interest in Chinese national music as well as foreign music. Generally, the aim of Chinese mainstream music education is not to develop expert musicians but to imbue culture (Law & Ho, 2011).

One of the main goals of Lithuanian music teaching within the general education system is to preserve and maintain Lithuanian culture heritage and traditions (Vitkauskas et al., 2012). Preserving national identity is often seen as a main goal within a Lithuanian music education system. The subject of music consists of three areas: musical expression (singing, playing musical instruments, composing, improvising and arranging); listening to music; musical literacy and music cognition in the social and cultural environment (the applying of musical knowledge on social cultural activities. Singing, including choral (joint) singing, is important across all the Baltic countries. Song Festivals in Lithuania, as an expression of natural cultural identity, show exceptionality and uniqueness of music education. The case of Lithuania can also be of interest as music has a good balance within the general curriculum and there is a close relationship between the national cultural context and music teacher training. Versatile musical education of a child is implemented by developing all musical abilities, including music performance, creative imagination, by satisfying the individual musical aesthetic expression needs of each child, by employing different kinds of musical activity and by introducing perception of the value of music (Lithuanian folk and professional music).

Teachers in both countries are among the lowest paid professionals. However, in terms of their professional development, many teaching degree programs require that students complete 4 years of study in music. In China and Lithuania, music subject is mostly taught by specialists—music subject teachers at all stages of the comprehensive school (there are a few exceptions in primary level where music is taught by classroom teachers with additional qualification for teaching music).

### **3.1.1. Music activities at primary and secondary schools**

China implements all-round education policy for students on moral education, intellectual education, physical education and aesthetic education (Huang, 2016). It can also be applied to the general music teaching. Classroom music education emphasises singing with a significant amount of directed body movement being integrated into the songs. In first and second grades, students

concentrate on ‘music games’; in third through sixth grades, students focus on the education of feelings, musical forms and structures, in addition to instrumental performance; in seventh through ninth grades students focus on the music (Law & Ho, 2009).

Musical education of primary school pupils in Lithuania is distinguished by the variety of forms of activities. They include involvement in music (singing, playing various rhythmical and melodic instruments), knowledge of musical notation, creation of music (experimenting with sounds, improvisation and composition), listening to music and evaluation (Del pradinio, pagrindinio ir vidurinio..., 2015). Participation in choir is optional although every school has a choir. Music in Lithuania’s secondary schools is organised around specific music activities (singing, instrumental performing, composing, listening and understanding music), in practice, more holistic approach to music education is adopted. Music is often seen as an important vehicle for developing wide cultural understanding and preserving or establishing a national identity. This is particularly prevalent in Eastern European countries (Rodriquez-Quiles y Gaarcia & Dogani, 2011). Music (musicology) is one of the optional final exams. These exams refer to World and Lithuanian musical culture, music theory (music language), singing and instrumental performing.

**Table 3. Music activities at primary and secondary schools in China and Lithuania**

	China	Lithuania
Primary school	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Music-making (singing)</li> <li>- Music games (1–2 grades)</li> <li>- Rhythm movement</li> <li>- Music listening</li> <li>- Education of musical forms and structures</li> <li>- Instrumental performance (3–6 grades)</li> <li>- Education of feelings</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Music-making (singing)</li> <li>- Listening to music and evaluation</li> <li>- Knowledge of musical notation</li> <li>- Music-making (instrumental performance)</li> <li>- Musical expression in social life (musical performances in school and out-of-school)</li> </ul>
Secondary school	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Music appreciation (7–9 grades)</li> <li>- Musical expressions (singing, performance and improvisation)</li> <li>- Music theory</li> <li>- Music history (music form and styles)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Musical expression (singing, playing, composing)</li> <li>- Listening to music and evaluation</li> <li>- Music cognition in the social and cultural environment</li> </ul>

#### 4. Conclusions and discussion

School music education has an important role in Chinese and Lithuanian culture. Music is highly valued by Chinese and Lithuanian societies in general today; therefore, educating children in music is given a high priority. The people in China and Lithuania seem to see music as an important aspect of daily life, as well as an important vehicle for accomplishing goals (such as use of music education by the government to promote nationalism or preserve a national identity). From the analysis of the collected data, it appears that the music education in each country might have some diversity in relation to the way it is put into practice based on contextual, cultural or circumstantial factors. However, our findings suggest that each country has something to learn from the other, so demonstrating the usefulness of comparative research for shedding new light on established systems and practices.

The comparative research on general music education in Chinese and Lithuanian comprehensive schools revealed several similarities as well as differences in their organisation and the level of prescription of the music curriculum. Most importantly, the findings of this study have highlighted that the notions of school music education in Lithuania and China are insignificantly different. However, in

some cases, there is a contradiction between the 'written curriculum' and the 'curriculum in praxis' (Rodriquez-Quiles y Gaarcia & Dogani, 2011). For that reason, it is argued that studies on music education only based on official documents can only cover a part of the educational reality.

Both, Chinese and Lithuanian music curricular expose the intention of supporting music education as an essential part of creative, comprehensive education and emphasise the idea that the basis for general music education is 'learning by doing' or three internationally known disciplines of school music, namely, music-making (singing and playing instruments), listening and composing, as it develops personal skills and cultural awareness. However, the process of learning has been differently specified as well as options open for students. Equally, this study showed that the singing (both countries focused on collective or choral singing in schools) has an exceptional role in Lithuanian and Chinese music education and cultivating student's interest in national music as well as foreign music.

In traditional societies, teachers have always received high respect and played a significant role in educating the next generation (Sachs, 2016). It appears that the music education in schools cannot be seen in isolation and is interrelated both with the quality of teacher training and with specific competences. However, music teachers need more than the simple opportunity or freedom to use or to teach music in their classrooms (Holdhus & Espeland, 2017). They need specific guidelines to help them structure child-centred, process-driven learning experiences so that the value-laden implications of teaching about very different cultures are handled sensitively and constructively. Consequently, a special emphasis should be put on the quality of the music teacher-training curriculum incorporating not only appropriate materials but also understanding of music in differing societies and contexts.

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